

Editorials

Questions linger in Sandhills probe

In light of previous North Carolina sting operations, it is difficult to understand why federal, state and local authorities have dropped an investigation into the alleged mishandling of \$1.1 million in public funds by staff members of the Sandhills Mental Health Center.

After conversations with personnel at the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI), the state Department of Human Resources (DHR) and the Sandhills Center, it appears that the scenario goes like this:

•A DHR audit, which was conducted over seven months ago, noted that over \$1.1 million was apparently misappropriated and "should be recovered."

•A further review by DHR determined that most of the "state" money was connected with the construction of the Moore County unit, and that only \$229,000 in "state" funds should be recovered. The title to the Moore County unit, which the audit says was overpriced by \$175,000, is to be transferred to the Center.

•Members of the Sandhills Center Board of Directors agreed to repay the state \$229,000, taking the money from "local" tax supported funds.

•DHR is happy. They are getting the allegedly misappropriated "state" funds back. They say any further investigation is up to local authorities, the Center or the FBI. Federal and local funds, which may or may not have been mishandled, are apparently not the state's responsibility.

•Although the audit repeatedly recommends that "appropriate authorities further investigate," Sandhills says they are not taking the matter further, just paying the state money back. The SBI is not involved, and the FBI cannot find a record of any probe despite the alleged mishandling of "federal" funds.

During 1983, the FBI spent seven months investigating the misuse of CETA funds in Robeson County.

Two Hoke County residents were indicted for applying for and getting CETA jobs in Robeson County. The two allegedly said they lived in Robeson. They were paid for the work that they did under the program, which together amounted to about \$8,700.

Despite the few convictions which came out of the so-called "Robecor" probe and relatively small amounts of money involved, we believe the investigation was an appropriate use of the FBI's manpower and funds.

However, with the allegations of misuse of federal money pointed

out in the DHR audit, one has to wonder why the FBI has not been attracted to a Sandhills Center probe.

Prior to its investigative conclusion last October, federal agents spent about \$135,000 and 15 months looking into corruption in Columbus County.

With the hard work the FBI put into the Colcor undercover operation, it would seem that the federal agency and other authorities would find it reasonably easy to look into the DHR audit's charges of gross "conflict of interest," overpayments to private corporations operated by Center staff members, improper diverting of funds into staff operated corporations, distorted payroll records, Center vehicles used for private purposes, violations of Internal Revenue regulations and abuse of annual paid leave.

So far, those state authorities involved with investigating the matter seem satisfied that justice has been done, and appear to think little about repaying missing North Carolina tax funds with more local tax funds.

We are not suggesting that state, federal and local authorities launch a vindictive campaign against the Center and its former employees.

We do believe that if tax money has been mishandled, the taxpayers have a right to see the investigation brought to a conclusion, and an effort made to recover the funds from those responsible.

Attendance will now be taken...

Is there anyone here besides Ken McNeill?



Letters To The Editor

Absence article is tasteless, ill-timed

To the Editor:
I believe the front page item in this week's edition of *The News Journal* entitled "Board of Ed Member Has Low Marks" to be one of the most tasteless and untimely articles I have ever seen published in the local paper.

Although your intent must have been to enlighten the public on attendance at meetings of elected city and county officials, it seems that the same information could have been presented in a different manner at another location in the paper.

To single out Mina Townsend, who experienced very deep personal tragedy during the past year, in a front page story is less than kind.

Needless to say, attendance of elected officials at meetings is of utmost importance in any organization. We must not lose sight of the fact, however, that there could be extenuating circumstances, whether a person misses one meeting or whether he or she misses seven!

Wouldn't it be nice if newspaper reporters were required to take a course (along with their journalism) such as "The Compassionate Dissemination of Information?"

Betty Upchurch

School board member needs no defending

Dear Editor:
Mina Townsend does not need defending as a member of the Hoke County Board of Education.

Sherry Matthews' story on the front page of THE NEWS JOURNAL the week of January 26 with the headline BOARD OF EDUCATION MEMBER HAS LOW MARKS gives one the impression that Mrs. Townsend is a disinterested board member because of her attendance.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

I served with Mina Townsend for six years.

If my memory serves me correctly, she only missed one or two meetings in all those years. She always called me and explained why she must miss the meeting.

Mrs. Townsend was an excellent representative for the people and the children of Hoke County.

Our philosophies were miles apart, but she always gave me the utmost respect.

Mina never played politics, and she did what she thought was right. I respected her for it whether I agreed with her or not.

The personal tragedy she and Bob suffered would disarrange any human being's schedule.

A long departed close personal friend of mine told me years ago there were three sides to every story.

The one each side told and the one nobody wanted told. Headlines are eye catchers!

Perhaps it would be more kind to try and get the story nobody wanted told before they were written.

Sincerely,
Raz Autry

December cold not explained

Dear editor:
Everybody pokes fun at the weather bureau when it's wrong, but this time it was right. It reported that the past December was the coldest December in the history of the country.

It's absolutely right about that and I've got a heating bill to prove it.

What caused the historically low temperatures is hard to explain. Some weather experts blame it on the erratic path of the jet stream, but what causes the jet stream, they don't say.

They're like the ancient experts when the world was considered flat. When asked what held the world up, they said it rested on the back of a huge turtle. If you asked

what held the turtle up, they chopped your head off.

There is a more civilized handling of a ticklish problem like that today.

Ask a politician how he would reduce the \$200 billion dollar deficit and he'll say flat out he'd cut government spending. Ask him where he'd cut and he'll say over his shoulder he has to hurry off to a committee meeting. This saves heads but doesn't affect the deficit.

Nowadays we know the world isn't flat because turtles don't grow that big, and December was the coldest December on record because we've been keeping records too long.

Yours faithfully,
J.A.

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Son of Tarzan takes a certain calling

By Warren Johnston

My father once competed against Johnny Weissmuller in an Ohio swim meet.

Weissmuller probably wouldn't have remembered it, but it was a fairly big deal for my father, who was 10 years old at the time and four years younger than his opponent.

"Did you beat him?" I asked my father in 1956 as we watched an overweight Bwana Jim stroke across an alleged African lagoon.

During the 1950's, Weissmuller played Bwana in the "Jungle Jim" television series. He quit acting like Tarzan after a fight with MGM in 1947.

"Jungle Jim" was one of my favorite shows, and it didn't matter to me that Weissmuller's Australian crawl had slowed considerably since the time he had won five Olympic gold medals during the 1920's.

Bwana was about 53. To compensate, the director sped up the camera to make it look like Jim was really flying across the lagoon.

"He looks pretty fast," I said naively. He had covered the mile-wide body of water in less than 10 seconds.

The Puppy Papers

"He was fast back then," my father said, admitting that he had finished second to the world record holder.

Jim had made the swim dressed in his usual khaki uniform and mid-calf jungle boots. The clothing didn't seem to slow him down and dried quickly once he got out of the water.

After the jaunt across the lagoon, the unwinded Jim hopped out of the water, climbed up on a huge rock and surveyed the landscape in search of a group of slimy elephant hunters.

"He's got them now," my father said, as Jim hurried off in pursuit of the nasty band, who had about a 10-mile lead on him.

The aging Weissmuller covered the ground in no time, swinging on convenient vines and using uncluttered trails to reach the bad guys. Jim collared them immediately by bumping their heads together.

In what seemed like seconds and presumably after a forced march, he turned the bunch of ivory hunters over to the game warden and the show ended.

"He got a lot done in 30 minutes," my father said, hoping to distract me from further questions about the 1919 swim meet. "Although, I suppose you have to move pretty fast when you are Jungle Jim," he added.

"How far ahead of you was he?" I asked. "About two lengths of the pool," my father admitted. "I beat him on the start, though."

I can remember thinking what it would have been like had my father beaten Weissmuller. My brothers and I might have all ended up being sons of Tarzan.

I spent the next couple of days practicing my Tarzan calls. Although my voice was changing, I thought I had them down when the neighbors started complaining.

My mother decided I was watching too much television and made me go to bed early.

I've tried the calls a few times since then, but never with a great deal of success.

Perhaps it was a good thing that my father didn't beat Weissmuller.